

Exploring strategic perspectives on the Special Constabulary


The Police Journal:
Theory, Practice and Principles
1–22

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DOI: 10.1177/0032258X211028272
journals.sagepub.com/home/pjx



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Abstract

This article explores senior and strategic perspectives on the volunteer Special Constabulary in England and Wales, based on 38 interviews with senior police leaders. The strategic context and leadership of Special Constabularies represents an overlooked element of police leadership, given the scale and potential of volunteer officers to impact upon policing delivery and reform. The paper identifies tension between a traditional strategic paradigm that frames bounded expectations of the role of Special Constables, emphasising differences between them and their paid counterparts, and considerations of police reform which prompt different thinking in respect of practice, identity and integration of volunteer officers.

Keywords

Special Constabulary, police leadership, police reform

Introduction

The strategic leadership of the Special Constabulary in police forces represents an important but largely overlooked element of police leadership. This paper, in the first study of its kind, explores the perspectives of senior and strategic leaders within policing in respect of the volunteer Special Constabulary in England and Wales, and the strategic culture reflected in their perspectives.

It is difficult to find more than an occasional or cursory mention of Special Constables in mainstream policy, professional and academic discourse of policing. Britton and

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Callender (2018: 149) describe the Special Constabulary as ‘missing in action’ across strategic thinking and reform in policing; suggesting that a ‘regular-centrism’ (2018: 150) sits pervasively across policing strategic discourse, shaping the priorities of police reform and debates on police professionalism. The numbers of ‘regular’ police officers has tended to retain a privileged, symbolic position in debates on the future strategic challenges for policing and has often been centre-stage within a prominent strategic discourse on the impact of austerity on policing (Sindall and Sturgis, 2013). In marked contrast to this emphasis on ‘regular’ paid police officer roles and numbers, a near-halving of the number of Special Constables in recent years (Britton, 2017a, 2017b, 2018; Home Office, 2019) and commensurate reductions in the hours served (Britton et al., 2018) have received only occasional and very limited attention at a strategic, senior or national level in policing. While there has been a ‘rhetoric of growth’ for the Special Constabulary, at least episodically, across recent decades (Britton and Callender, 2018: 150) and it is true that ‘successive governments have endeavoured to promote, reinvigorate and increase the numbers of Special Constables’ (Bullock and Leeney, 2016: 483), such growth narratives have simply not materialised or sustained in reality (Britton and Callender, 2018; Britton et al., 2016, 2018; Hieke, 2017). Where there is a strategic attention upon the Special Constabulary these are primarily to be found in peripheral, niched strategic documents, such as national strategies for the Special Constabulary or for ‘Citizens in Policing’ (cf. NPCC, 2018), rather than within broader, generalist strategic documents on the future of policing. This strategic picture suggests an unfulfilled strategic potential (Britton and Callender, 2018; Britton and Knight, 2016), summed up by Caless (2018: 25) who talks of:

... frustration with the unnecessary short-sightedness of individual police forces and with the Home Office’s rather feeble adoption of an incomplete national strategy for police volunteers. So much more could be done than is being done. So much more use could be made of special constables.

The practical scale and reality on the ground is far more substantive than this relative strategic neglect would suggest. Within England and Wales, the Special Constabulary has a long history in policing (Leon, 1991, 2018a, 2018b), and currently over 10,000 volunteer Special Constables perform approximately 3 million hours of service across their communities in England and Wales in an average year (Britton et al., 2018; Home Office, 2019). The position of the Special Constabulary in policing and the meanings of volunteering are being reconstituted in practice, despite the absence of much wider strategic debate. Special Constables over the past two decades have experienced a steady shift towards a primarily front-line deployment model increasingly equivalent, at least in respect of operational context, to their paid ‘regular’ police officer colleagues (Bullock and Leeney, 2016). Special Constables are increasingly engaged in specialist roles and teams (Britton et al., 2018, 2019b).

Developments in role, deployment, specialisation and training within the Special Constabulary can be conceptualised as representing elements of a ‘professionalisation’ for volunteer police officers. However, specific consideration of the Special Constabulary has largely been absent from wider calls to ‘professionalise’ policing and from

claims for the police to be considered a 'profession'. The debate on police professionalisation has a long history but has also seen something of a reassertion in recent years (Green and Gates, 2014; Holdaway, 2017; Lumsden, 2017; Neyroud, 2011a, 2011b; Sklansky, 2011). Police professionalisation is an ambiguous and multi-faceted concept, spanning elements of being 'professional' in the sense of qualities of practice, to being a 'profession' in terms of occupational traits and professional status. Holdaway (2017) explores the wider social context, meanings and effects of claims of police professionalisation, reflecting it as being in part about 'symbolic processes during which claims for status and authority about occupational values are made' (2017: 596). Lumsden (2017) reflects on police professionalism as being 'a contested and ongoing process' (2017: 5), representing an entanglement of police reform discourse, debates on recruitment and education standards, and technologies of regulation and control, through which 'professional status is contested, negotiated and socially constructed, involving boundary-work and identity-work' (2017: 6). Lee and Punch (2004) recognise that different 'interests' are at play in debates about future models of professionalisation. The Special Constabulary represents an interesting context for these wider considerations of police 'professionalisation', in particular in terms of how inclusive such concepts are to all of those engaged in policing including volunteer officers, and in particular how the role and identity of part-time volunteers is considered within wider ongoing developments towards defining a policing profession.

The context of the Special Constabulary presents a juxtaposition: on the one hand, minimal strategic engagement and debate regarding the Special Constabulary as an element of policing strategy, police professionalisation debates, and police reform; on the other hand, a Special Constabulary with significant numbers, with a sizeable and in some respects expanding operational remit, and with significant potential for further development and professionalisation in the future.

While the expanding literature on police leadership has involved little or no direct consideration of the Special Constabulary, the broader discourse on police leadership raises some interesting questions for the strategic leadership and direction of Special Constabularies. There is recognition of how leadership in policing needs to 'change to better meet the needs of modernisation and reform agendas' and to reflect 'a multiplicity of demands' (Ramshaw and Simpson, 2019: 48), recognising the complex and contradictory strategic pressures on policing (Davis and Bailey, 2018), and the challenges of achieving organisational (Hoggett et al., 2018) and evidence-based (Huey et al., 2018) reforms.

Reflecting these strategic contexts there is increased interest and emphasis across the police leadership literature in a shift from 'command and control', transactional models towards leadership styles that are more participatory, shared, transformational and inclusive (Cockcroft, 2020; Masal, 2014; Silvestri, 2007). Such changes in models of leadership are identified as encompassing more 'innovative' styles (Davis and Bailey, 2018), viewed as important in the achievement of longer-term change and doing things differently (Cockcroft, 2014; Ramshaw and Simpson, 2019).

The importance of pluralist, partnering, shared models of leadership are also identified (cf. Masal, 2014); 'underpinned by principles of collectivity, support, interdependence, cooperation and participation' (Davis and Silvestri, 2020: 79). Such shared

leadership thinking emphasises power and authority being distributed rather than centralised and solely rank-based, facilitating creativity and innovation, fostering commitment and relationships, and growing organisational adaptability and leadership capacity. Emerging thinking on police leadership also conceptualises leadership as partnership, recognising the ‘challenges of working across organizational boundaries, cultures and practices’ (Crawford and Cunningham, 2015: 71) and of achieving more inclusive organisational cultures, occupational cultures, and interpretations of police identity (cf. Workman-Stark, 2017).

The Special Constabulary represents an important but little engaged dimension of policing in respect of considerations of police leadership. Broader leadership drivers across policing in terms of police reform, innovation, organisational change, cultural leadership, and evidence-based change seem highly relevant to the challenges presented by a traditional strategic paradigm for the Special Constabulary. Such traditional thinking appears to frame bounded expectations of role, contribution, identity and integration, potentially limiting the positioning, practice and professionalisation of Special Constables (cf. Britton and Callender, 2018; Caless, 2018).

Shifting from such traditional thinking will require fundamental changes ‘at the structural and cultural level of policing’ (Cockcroft, 2019: 24). The evolving thinking in policing towards transformational, shared, adaptive, inclusive leadership styles speak to questions of what nature of strategic leadership the Special Constabulary requires in the future, and within that as to how strategic police leadership most effectively navigates complex questions of integration, professionalisation, inclusion and valuing across organisational and occupational cultures and professional identities.

This strategic leadership context for the development of the Special Constabulary has been a long-neglected area for research and policy (Britton and Callender, 2018). As Ramshaw (2019: 141) argues, this is not only an important gap in wider research considerations of police leadership, but is also fundamental to the strategic development of the Special Constabulary:

If Special Constables are to be more firmly embedded in the strategic delivery of core areas of policing and become more of a presence in reform, modernisation and professionalisation agendas, much rests upon progressive leadership and direction.

This paper aims to begin to address this strategic gap in research, by developing insight in relation to key factors affecting organisational development and strategic implementation of policy in relation to the use of Special Constables. In exploring these issues, the paper undertakes an exploratory qualitative study engaging senior police leaders.

Method

This small-scale, explorative qualitative study draws upon data generated in 38 semi-structured interviews with senior leaders in policing, serving in four different police forces, to explore strategic cultures and leadership in relation to volunteering in policing. The participants were drawn from four different police force sites in England and Wales;

these sites were not selected randomly but were contingent on other research activity being undertaken in the police forces concerned.

Numbers of interviews were distributed more or less evenly across each the four force research sites: 9 in Force A, 7 in Force B, 12 in Force C and 10 in Force D. The study was designed to develop insight, through rich and in-depth discussion with senior leaders. Given national variation in Special Constabulary models (cf. Britton et al., 2018) the distinctiveness and difference of individual force contexts is recognised as being important. Each of the four forces were moderately sized forces in terms of overall population size, each having a mixture of rural and more urban policing contexts. Special Constabularies vary in terms of comparative size as measured by headcount quite significantly across the country; the comparative headcount of the four Special Constabularies of the police forces in this study, measured either by the ratio of Special Constables to regular officers, or alternatively measured by ratio of Special Constables to head of population, were each close to the national average, and similar to one other. In overall size, Force C was the largest force, approximately a third larger than Force A and then Force B. Force D was about a quarter smaller than both Force A and Force B. The overall operational model for the four Special Constabularies was also very similar across the four study contexts, in respect of approach to initial training, the degree of specialisation of Special Constable roles within the force, the approach in each of the four forces to Special Constabulary leadership and ranks, levels of support roles and investment, and average hours served by Special Constables. Forces A and C had, in years preceding the study, had drives to grow the size of their Special Constabularies, but as reflected above this had in effect by the time of the study had little legacy impact on overall headcount of volunteer officers, which as said above were close to the national average and similar to Forces B and D.

While there was a high degree of consistency and similarity of response across the four force sites in this study, a degree of caution should still be exercised in presuming a wider generalisability nationally across all police forces, given that there is more broadly nationally a significant variation in size and scale, training, deployment and operating models across Special Constabularies.

In each force, interviews were conducted with ranks ranging from Chief Officer to Chief Inspector. Across the sites, 9 participants were of Chief Officer rank (2 Chief Constables, 3 Deputy Chief Constables, and 4 Assistant Chief Constables), 8 were Chief Superintendent in rank, and 10 Superintendent, representing a quite strong coverage of the most senior leaders within the respective police force sites. It is recognised that there was a relatively wide spread of seniority of ranks engaged in the study, albeit those of Chief Inspector rank were selected as participants because they were in strategic, head-quarters roles within the force, generally including some strategic responsibility in their portfolios for Special Constables.

The study, which was small-scale and explorative in nature, aimed to engage as participants only regular police officer senior and strategic leaders within forces. The study did not engage with other senior and strategic leaders in policing, such as Police and Crime Commissioners or their senior staff, senior police staff within the forces, regional or national policy leads, or volunteer senior and strategic leaders within the Special Constabulary. The perspectives of these broader senior and strategic leaders are

important and merit study, but it was envisaged that they might also potentially be very different and given the small and explorative scale of this study the choice was taken to focus on senior and strategic regular police officers in the four forces concerned for this particular study.

In total, 38 interviews were completed, each lasting between 45–60 minutes, and the resultant (approximately 30 hours) of interviews were transcribed verbatim. Thirty of the participants were male, and 8 female. Two participants were BAME. The interview schedule prompted topics of the current strategic approach to the Special Constabulary, future thinking and vision, strategic engagement and approach, and perceptions of role and value. Interviews were managed in a way which sought to limit direction and to enable senior leaders to focus upon areas and issues that they wished to develop upon. Data was thematically analysed involving the following six steps: ‘familiarisation’ through reading and re-reading transcripts, ‘code generation’, ‘theme identification’, ‘review’ of themes and codes, ‘labelling themes’ and ‘report writing’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The principles of the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (2009) guided ethical practice. Informed consent was gained from all interview participants and issues of anonymity, protection from harm and capacity to withdraw from the study (up until finalised data analysis) were assured.

The subsequent sections of this paper explore four key themes which emerged from the data relating to the identified discourses of volunteering in policing: new strategic directions colliding with traditional thinking; identity, authenticity and the ‘othering’ of Specials; doubts about the future for volunteer constables and more radical thinking; and negative practices, neglect and salience.

Findings

New strategic directions colliding with traditional thinking

Senior leaders tended to cast the current period as being an ‘important moment’ in time for the Special Constabulary. Viewing it as a ‘time of change’, they saw it as a critical time with senior leaders identifying many drivers for change in the Special Constabulary. These included the context of austerity and associated reductions in policing budgets, an unprecedented period of pressure of demand, a period of new challenges and expectations placed upon policing, and an enthusiasm by Police and Crime Commissioners for a growth in volunteer numbers. The senior officers saw an important context for change as being the changing role of police constables, recognising increasing complexity in the role and demands for improving ‘professionalism’ (see Fleming, 2014; HMIC, 2017; Holdaway, 2017). A common theme across interviews was also the desire to achieve a better alignment of Special Constabulary contribution to local policing priorities, and a greater integration of Specials with their regular colleagues.

There was quite a high degree of agreement across senior leaders about the ‘drivers for change’ and for the need to move beyond what was recognised as ‘old fashioned’, ‘legacy’ and ‘historical’ thinking about the role of Special Constables. There was considerably less consensus in relation to the direction that such change might and should take, with wide ranging views on the future. There were some leaders who felt that the

more traditional perspective of what it means to be a Special Constable works well, and others who went further reflecting some resistance to the extent of broadening of role that there had already been, questioning value for money, citing potential conflicts over scarce training resource and opportunities for professional specialisation for regular officers, and questioning competency. For some leaders the Special Constabulary they envisioned was one very much defined by a specific operating environment and contribution, primarily in neighbourhood or response, generic policing settings, and primarily embedded within regular officer teams and essentially ancillary in role.

For others whilst there was enthusiasm for change, the senior leaders held quite widely differing views of what that change might look like. One more common viewpoint in this wider fog of differing visions was some consensus around having more diverse pathways for Special Constables to be recruited into the force and deployed operationally to tackle a wider range of roles and priorities. Greater heterogeneity within operational thinking was conceived to be attractive to incoming volunteers as well as effective and efficient in dealing with demands that their force face in the future. . . . we might see there is a lot more a Special Constabulary, Special Constables, might do. I think we, the police, at senior level, we have had one view on this for many years and that's been that. We live in different times now and we need to think differently, think laterally. [6B]

It [the Special Constable role] has been 'one size fits all' and we need to move on from that. [8A]

Some senior leaders recognised the need to move from viewing the Special Constabulary as a homogeneous entity to a diverse, differentially skilled and specialised body of volunteer officers. They described a need to view volunteers as individuals, with differing motivations, desires and capabilities, to enable a broader range of volunteering opportunities which would improve engagement, morale and contribution. As part of the organisational transformation agenda within the research sites, the posting of a small number of Specials into specialist areas, traditionally seen as being the exclusive domains of regular paid police officers, was cited as being symbolic of positive change.

. . . I think symbols in services is an important thing I think for you to understand. So we've now got Special Constables that are full-time with traffic . . . they're even wearing white hats . . . the fact we're allowing them to wear white hats and be given skills that a traffic officer has, that's symbolic around how far we've moved. [5B]

This was perceived to represent a clear break with previously held, 'historical' traditional perspectives about what the role of Special Constables should be.

. . . now I realise that's a bit outside the box, because most people would say, well Specials should be visible patrol. Who says they should be? [2A]

Alongside such thinking, senior leaders also provided examples of frustrations in how they felt the police, and within that their senior officer colleagues, were structurally and culturally failing to understand and recognise the individual skills volunteers are positioned to provide, and how this was a key aspect of desired change in the future. Rather

than capitalise upon the pre-existing skills that some volunteers may have, forces tended to locate volunteers within a standardised system, in which qualifications and experiences were not valued unless they had been developed within and had been accredited by that force. This reflects some of the arguments made for pluralisation and ‘shared leadership’ in policing, moving away from centralised and rank-focused command and control structures, towards recognising diversity of skills and competence (Cockcroft, 2014; Rogers, 2015; van Dijk et al., 2015).

So that’s a big one, a lot of people have, you know, been Specials for nine, ten years and they haven’t been able to drive a police car. One of them [a Special Constable] has been a fire fighter for nine years, driving on blue lights in a fire engine and he’s a fully qualified medic. I mean I want him turning up at my house if I’ve got an issue. [4A]

Recognition, reward, training and development, integration and skills-recognition were all perceived as important, but it was felt that relatively little progress had actually taken place strategically to develop new approaches and enhance supervision and leadership to achieve these goals. While these issues might be seen as important in respect of the Special Constabulary, there was recognition that they often failed to attain a status as being ‘force priorities’ in a broader sense, and in essence received relatively little senior leadership attention or scrutiny. While ‘integration’ promotes viewing Specials as being the same as regular officers, there was also recognition by some senior leaders of the need for a different style to managing and supporting volunteers. This was recognised as needing to be an organisation-wide agenda, not confined to specific areas. As part of this, all departments should be prepared and equipped to be able to provide support to the Special Constabulary, even if not having done so before. At present, there were perceived to be large deficits in such provisions and there is a need to understand how the Special Constabulary is positioned within the dynamic and shifting structures of the organisation.

When we grow them [Specials] into new roles, we have a ‘the computer says no’ attitude, from people in stores, from HR, from some areas of the operational business, from some command teams. It’ll change over time, I’m sure, but at present it’s hard to do new things with them because across our organisation it isn’t geared up that way. [2C]

The findings suggest a context where some senior leaders in policing recognise, desire and articulate a commitment to change the Special Constabulary, but also recognise constraints in thinking and the challenge of moving on from historical models, roles and practice. This reflects the challenges associated with shifting thinking, cultures and behaviours in policing more broadly (Cockcroft, 2014; Loftus, 2010). The Special Constabulary presents an interesting site to consider how police leadership adapts and grows to engage innovation and to be change-focused (Davis and Bailey, 2018) and evidence-based (Huey et al., 2018), addressing issues of organisational change in terms of rethinking and redesigning deployment and operating models for Special Constabularies. The findings suggest the challenge remains of achieving a shift in leadership thinking and practice at a ‘structural and cultural level’ (Cockcroft, 2019: 24), given the resonance of

traditional modes of thinking about Special Constables, and in achieving different constructs of 'professionalisation' for volunteer officers.

The next theme explores some of those potential constraints in thinking, focusing on aspects of the current paradigm of police strategic culture which influence the authenticity and othering of volunteer police officers.

Identity, authenticity and the 'othering' of Special Constables

Senior police leaders described issues related to the perceived legitimacy of Specials to hold warranted powers and to be seen as equivalent to regular paid police constables. There were tensions associated to the symbols of 'the uniform' and the 'warrant card', which sometimes position Specials as lacking authenticity in their position as a holder of the Office of Constable. In some cases, senior leaders placed considerable emphasis on the need for Special Constables to be distinctly identifiable as such, at least internally within the force, for example through their warrant card signifying them as a Special Constable, or through distinctive elements of uniform such as 'SC' epaulettes or distinct series of collar numbers.

To be blunt, yes they are [different]. They mostly have a fraction of the experience, and policing is a lot about that experience, that instinct, that craft and they all have had just a fraction of our training. [7D]

Operationally, it's important we can tell the difference out on incidents. [8C]

There appears to be a fundamental confusion in senior strategic thinking in policing in relation to the position, status and identity of Special Constables. Specials were recognised in the interviews as being police constables, as being 'the same' with the same warranted powers and authority as regular paid police officers. Specials were also positioned in the same interviews as being 'different', as being seen as less than their regular paid officer colleagues, and in effect by some senior leaders as not being 'the real thing'.

They are constables, the same powers, same uniform. They are not regulars, not the same, there are lots of important differences, mainly in competence and experience, but also just availability, task-ability. [3A]

Senior leaders commonly talked of police officers *and* Specials, or similarly used 'police officers' or 'police constables' as being synonymous with regular paid police officers. Many of the senior leaders reflected that this framing of Specials as being different was institutionalised in the thinking of their forces, for example reflecting that formal force policy documents also used a language of 'police officers' or 'police constables' in cases which only applied to regular paid officers and not volunteer Special Constables.

I think we are confused as a service. They're police constables when we want them to be, they're not when we don't. [7B]

Such cultural conceptualisations, at a strategic level, have an impact on levels of confidence in Specials and tend to fuel questions about the degree to which Special Constables can be relied upon.

‘You can’t rely on them’. And this is the issue, you must never rely on the Special because we don’t rely on volunteers. They’re a nice to have, you know, that’s the language that gets used. [2B]

... we just bolt ‘em on to stuff, rather than really integrating ‘em into any of our plans. And I guess it comes back to, “Well, they can’t really be relied upon.” They can, you know. [5A]

Reflections on the professionalisation agenda in policing reveal a further inconsistency at the heart of senior strategic thinking about the Special Constabulary. Senior leaders often state ‘being a volunteer does not mean being an amateur’, yet there is contradictory and ingrained thinking that being a volunteer does reflect lower skills and experience, reduced reliability, lower expectations and in some cases directly linking a construct of policing being professional through officers and staff being paid.

You must never build policing on the back of volunteers. They can make a contribution but it must never become core. We need to be professional, a professionalised service because that is what the public expects of us. [8D]

We need to be realistic what’s reasonable for us to expect volunteers, part-timers, to come in and to do. At the end of the day, they are just volunteers. [4C]

The findings suggest that senior regular officer leaders in policing do experience some challenges and constraints in developing progressive and inclusive future models of police professionalism which are engaging and appreciative of volunteer police. Reflecting the work of Lumsden (2017: 6), there does appear to be ‘boundary-work’ and ‘identity-work’ at play. This tends towards an absorption and reinforcement of deep-seated ambiguities of the status of volunteer Special Constables both as being police officers and as being members of the police profession, and reveals some perceptions of part-time volunteer officers as being ‘amateur’ and being seen as outside of mainstream policing delivery and professional status.

Doubts about the future for volunteer constables

Alongside considerations for change and new directions for the Special Constabulary, for some senior and strategic leaders there were also more fundamental questions about the viability of a part-time, volunteer model of warranted police officers in the future. Central to such doubts was a wider agenda of police professionalism, straining the concept of a part-time, voluntary execution of an increasingly qualified, professionalised and technical constable role. There were desires to incorporate the Special Constabulary into wider thinking about the professionalisation of policing. However, the time commitments and investment to realise that was perceived by some to represent a significant challenge.

Part of me thinks that we, the police service is becoming so professional and the expectation of a police officer from the public is so high that there is a risk that we cannot use Special Constabulary as we have used them in the past. The problem with a Special is that they are not fully trained and although we want them to be fully trained, the time commitments, the requirements to do so are onerous. [2B]

For some, there was a language of ‘risk’ regarding the continuity of the Special Constabulary model, but couched in terms of operational exposure of less trained or experienced volunteer officers presenting risks to themselves, colleagues, members of the public or quality of service.

Out there publicly, the public will see them, a public inquiry will see them, their colleagues will see them, as having the same skills set as a full-time officer, and is that achievable? [7C]

In the area of vulnerability, are you going to see enough churn when you’re on duty of sexting, child grooming, domestic abuse, in the small number of hours, to actually be at your A game, and when you’re not, that means as an organisation we don’t deploy you to more and more things, or we do deploy you and we and the public don’t get the outcomes we would have wanted. [6C]

For some senior leaders, they saw a broader historical picture, and questioned whether what had been a potentially effective model in the past was still a viable model in the context of present day challenges and in the future, given changes across policing and the police workforce in recent decades, and the nature of current policing role and capability.

Then I think the world started to change . . . due to the general move to professionalise the regular police workforce and a general move to create police staff roles where warranted powers aren’t required . . . [the police] workforce starts to look different, you start to see roles that perhaps the Special Constabulary might have been there in the first place for now being taken up, and the distance between what it meant to be a regular paid police officer and a non-paid Special started to widen . . . Increasingly there has been driven a wedge between the role of the regular police constable and the Special Constable, the role for which a hundred years these people have been performing has increasingly looked like an anachronism, and something that’s past its use. [4D]

These doubts about the future for a voluntary, warranted police officer role prompted considerations by some senior leaders about what might evolve to replace the current approach. Such thinking included arguments for the need to ‘consider all options’, ‘fundamentally review’ and ‘start again’, reflecting viewpoints that a radically different policy and practice direction might be required.

Need to embark on a period of better understanding what our expectations, our need in the present day looks like. [6A]

Another model might be that you don’t have a Special Constabulary at all, it was a moment of time, with a rich history, and we celebrate it, but we don’t have Specials anymore. It’s a new era, different challenges, and we look towards doing something else. [9C]

For some senior leaders, answers lay in rethinking the volunteer nature of Specials, arguing that a more structured, and remunerated, 'reserve force' or 'retained officer' model represented a more viable future. Usually those supporting such models in their interviews cast an equivalency to military reserve models or to retained firefighter models and felt that there was learning from those contexts that should be considered by policing.

Like a retained firefighter or a reservist. They can be called upon. They can be relied upon, particularly at times of pressure and need. Skilled to do the same job to the same level. A truly professionalised, properly constituted reserve capability. Whether that has a voluntary aspect is a moot point, but I would argue it needs a paid element to fully deliver for us. [7A]

These examples of different thinking about the future of the Special Constabulary across the interviews does reflect positively in respect of evidence of adaptive, innovative police leadership. The findings do however reflect again conceptualisations of the police profession and of police professionalism which are neither inclusive nor appreciative of part-time, volunteer police. The findings reflect that some senior regular officers find it difficult to conceive of a part-time, amateur cohort of police officers as being capable of attaining professional standards or status, with assumptions that further professionalism is to be attained only through changes in payments or structures.

Negative practices and strategic neglect

Many senior leaders had perspectives that there remained negative and damaging behaviours, practices and views within policing towards the Special Constabulary.

We were always quite shocked when we spoke to . . . who often refers to Special Constables as cannon fodder. [1A]

There's still some haters [of the Special Constabulary] [3B]

There were numerous examples cited where it was recognised that the management and behaviours towards volunteer officers on the ground were variously disrespectful, discouraging and unwelcoming, and senior leaders reflected that their forces needed to do more to address this.

We all know teams, some stations, are wonderful [for Special Constables], and some are toxic. Look at the stats, you can see where they stay, [and] where they don't. [3C]

There was a recognition that more protection for and support to volunteer officers within the police is needed by senior leaders in exercising their role as cultural leaders.

. . . and there are others who for whatever reason culturally are not displaying the behaviours we would like to see . . . we shouldn't shy away from the fact that, you know, a number of our Specials will turn up and not feel very welcome. [7D]

Linking to this, while many forces now rely upon volunteer officers to play increasingly demanding roles, some senior leaders reflected that little investment has been made into the quality and appropriateness of supervisory and leadership skills regular supervisory officers have, with a recognition this can limit capacity to provide support and develop a capable and dynamic body of volunteers.

When we talk future leaders, leadership, which we do a whole lot in policing at the moment, we miss this out. I feel, at least I hope, I am a supporter [of Specials] and that I am seen as such but I have never had any formal training in it [leading volunteers] and I think all my senior colleagues are in the same boat. [4B]

We expect them [regular Sergeants and Inspectors] to find the space and to be good at managing them [volunteers] but I'm not sure we do anything to make it happen. [1C]

The findings point to a critical lack of space within organisational thinking to meaningfully advance the agenda of volunteer officers within policing, showing that it is not given the strategic space or importance compared to other agendas. Consequently, less planning and resource is given to it and there is less space available for developing thinking and future policy and practice.

... we spend far too much time talking about other stuff and probably not enough time talking about a range of subjects of which Specials is probably one. [12C]

Many senior leaders described most of their senior colleagues as both interested in and supportive of the Special Constabulary, but that there was just a lack of 'space', or 'bandwidth', for the issue given the 'many competing demands' on the desks of senior colleagues.

I find my senior colleagues are supportive [of the Special Constabulary], they are also very busy people and it's not for the want of us caring, but I doubt if there is bandwidth at our, certainly at this chief officer, level to have them on our radar very often in most forces. [6D]

Firstly, about the people who do this, amazing people. I am truly in awe of what they do, working all day and then putting on a uniform ... I and my team simply don't have time to consider and lead this in the way, in that ideal world, we would wish to. [10C]

The literature on police leadership reflects the huge breadth and depth of challenges faced by police leaders and shaping future leadership models in policing (cf. Ramshaw and Simpson, 2019). The findings in this study reflect associated difficulties for police leaders to bring to the leadership of Special Constabularies the expertise, training and attention required, in the light of the many wider competing demands on modern police leadership.

Discussion and conclusions

There is growing evidence of the scale of variation across Special Constabularies in England and Wales (cf. Britton, 2018) and while this study of senior leaders in four police forces provides insight, and foregrounds themes and issues for future research and

policy consideration, it should not be seen as representative of all forces or to be generalisable to all other force senior regular officer leadership teams.

A constraining strategic paradigm for the Special Constabulary

Overall, the interviews with senior leaders from the four police forces appear to expose a strategic culture among the senior leaders which falls some way short of the aspiration for 'progressive leadership and direction' (Ramshaw, 2019: 141). Contrasting with more aspirational thinking regarding the strategic potential for the growth, development and innovation of the Special Constabulary (Britton and Callender, 2018; Britton and Knight, 2016; Cales, 2018; NPCC, 2018), senior leaders in the study acknowledged that current thinking within their forces at senior level was often bounded, fixed and traditional, as reflected in wider academic study of policing cultures (Cockcroft, 2013, 2014; Loftus, 2009). The findings of this study suggest the need for new modes of police leadership which foster innovation and creativity (Davis and Bailey, 2018; Davis and Silvestri, 2020), support long-term thinking and change (Cockcroft, 2014), and which address the challenges facing the future development and growth of the Special Constabulary at a more 'structural and cultural level' (Cockcroft, 2019: 24). Rather than 'professionalisation' being seen as a framework through which to embrace growth and development, instead bounded conceptions of Special Constable role, deployment and capability together with perspectives of 'amateurism', tended towards a framing (at least for some senior regular officer leaders) of the 'professionalisation' of police officers as a cause to doubt and exclude the Special Constable role.

Across many of the interviews there was scepticism regarding value and capability, a tendency to question the authenticity of Special Constable identity as police officers (reflective of cf. Davis and Thomas, 2003, whose research discusses policing culture, change, and threats to 'core identity') and foregrounding contrast and difference (or, more accurately, inferiority) to regular paid police officers. This resonates with the 'regular-centrism' argument of Britton and Callender (2018), with the regular officer identity being 'idiographic' (Pratt, 2001), characterising particular valued ideals and beliefs, traits and commitments, and representing a form of cultural 'anchorage' (Abrams and Randsley de Moura, 2001) for policing identity. The 'differencing' of Special Constables by senior officers is in effect a process of 'meta-contrasting' (Hogg, 2001) against this dominant policing identity, a process of 'dis-identification' (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) placing Specials distant from the regular officer ideal along a 'prototypicality gradient' (Hogg, 2001). It is striking how often across the interviews in this study that this 'othering' of Special Constables, this 'identity work' (Lumsden, 2017) emphasising the boundaries and differences (and shortcomings) of Special Constables contrasted with their regular officer colleagues, involves the language of 'professionalism'. Holdaway (2017) argues that claims of being a 'profession' are in part 'symbolic processes during which claims for status and authority about occupational values are made' (2017: 596). Lumsden (2017) reflects that 'professional status is contested, negotiated and socially constructed' (2017: 6). In regular-centric police organisations, where the normative construct is of the paid, full-time, regular police officer, and regular officers (particularly those of more senior rank) are the

authoritative, powerful social group, such exclusive interpretations of identity and professional status would appear to present a real challenge for future growth and innovation of the part-time, volunteer police officer role.

Being a Special Constable is in effect a dimension of diversity in the police workforce, and there is an argument that in the same manner that policing can be seen as, for example, a 'gendered' space (Davis and Silvestri, 2020: 101) in which 'advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity are patterned' (Acker, 1990: 146), the regular-centric interpretation of the Special Constable role at senior level in policing is 'underpinned by normative assumptions' that 'draw on hegemonic' (Davis and Silvestri, 2020: 108) ideologies of the primacy of the paid professional officer in a similar way. Much of the wider literature on the Special Constabulary has repeatedly identified a peripheral, precarious cultural space for Special Constables (cf. research conducted several decades ago by Gill and Mawby, 1990, by Leon, 1991, and by Mirrlees-Black and Byron, 1994, to reflect the consistency of such findings over a very long period of time). Arguments of the Special Constable as being less experienced, less reliable, less professional, limited, all seem prominent in many of the interviews in this study, echoing once again the long-running and strategic cultural challenges for police organisations to provide leadership towards creating instead a context of mutual respect, valuing and appreciation, integration and inter-operability, growth and thriving professional practice for their volunteer officers.

As Ramshaw and Simpson (2019: 65) argue 'leadership style at the top is key to driving structural and operational change'; a negative or constraining culture 'at the top' in respect of police leadership of the Special Constabulary will reflect on cultural engagement, volunteer support and development, and upon deployment and impact, but in particular it will also shape the growth and innovation of models of the Special Constable role in the future. Sitting alongside these challenges, the senior leaders additionally reflected that Special Constables are a relatively neglected, low-salience issue for their senior leadership teams, with only very limited space for strategic consideration. What was less visible across a large majority of the interviews was a clarity of purpose or a formed ambition to shape future capability, role and contribution of Specials. One interviewee talked of a lack of 'inventive spirit' and a need to 'unbundle' future thinking from legacy policy and practice. Another talked of the 'design challenge' of what the Special Constabulary needed to look like in the future as being something that policing 'has not yet grasped'. What was strikingly absent from many interviews was any sense of consistent or compelling vision for the future.

Looking across the findings of this study, to balance this rather negative picture, there were also some signals of a more innovative, enabling, appreciative rethinking by some senior leaders. And more broadly many of the senior leaders did recognise some key drivers for strategic change, and exhibited self-awareness of the limitations of current thinking, culture and practice. There was some interest expressed for a more heterogeneous, differentiated and specialist approach, and recognition of the need to reconstitute how Specials are attracted and recruited, integrated, led, valued and supported. This thinking is consistent with, and supportive of, recent research and recommendations in respect of radically rethinking Special Constabulary roles and contribution (cf. Britton et al., 2019b), their volunteering pathways (cf. Wooff et al., 2019), the role of Specials in

community engagement (cg. Dickson, 2019), and Special Constabulary attraction and skills (cf. Britton and Knight, 2019), leadership (cf. Britton et al., 2019a), and career support and development (cf. Ramshaw and Cosgrove, 2019). The challenge for senior leaders across policing is how to foster these new areas of thinking, and to seek to break through the constraints of the current strategic culture and paradigm in respect of their Special Constabularies.

Implications for the embracing and valuing of a plural model of policing delivery

The findings of this study not only point to challenges for the future strategic leadership, vision and development of the Special Constabulary, but also suggest challenges more broadly for the strategic development and leadership of what is an increasingly plural delivery model and workforce for policing (Loader, 2000; Rogers, 2012; Stenning, 2009). This research suggests a degree of dissonance in senior policing culture and strategic thinking, with positive engagement of strategic drivers for change in the Special Constabulary juxtaposed with a low salience and with aspects of strategic thinking that risk presenting barriers to future growth and development. There is a broader resonance of these findings in respect of police strategic culture and plural policing more generally (Loftus, 2010). The embracing of plural models of policing delivery require a disruption of certain dominant patterns of cultural thinking, challenging of the instinctive privileging of the regular paid police officer role and deconstructing of cultural models that seek to differentiate and fragment the policing family.

The power of this cultural context is highlighted in studies of the roles and experiences of PCSOs, which have found them to be positioned as ‘credible’ only when they contribute to enforcement and crime control activities, rather than ‘softer’ community policing duties (Cosgrove and Ramshaw, 2015; O’Neill, 2015). This context prevents the positive development, connection and engagement across the increasing diversity in policing roles. The challenges of police senior strategic culture in respect of Special Constables speaks to wider challenges of citizen involvement and voluntarism, not only in policing but more widely across public services. As Noveck (2015: 272) argues:

for too long, as a result of history, theory, and institutional practice, citizens have been largely excluded from governing. Our institutions are not designed to allow, let alone encourage, rich, ongoing, collaboration.

These barriers to engaging the public and volunteers in the design and delivery of policing are often framed in a paradigm of risk, and linked to stories of vigilantism and delegitimised policing (Knight, 2017). Similar risks and issues are raised in examination of policing working effectively in collaborations or partnerships with other agencies (Glaser and Denhardt, 2010). This risk-averse culture in policing adds to the challenges outlined in this paper regarding generating new thinking about the police workforce model and engaging volunteers in effective and meaningful ways. The findings of this study call for further insight, review and critique of the long-term strategy for policing

models in England and Wales, and how they will interact and engage volunteers and communities more broadly.

Implications for police leadership

Recent years have seen significant growth in interest and research into police leadership (Cockcroft, 2014). Wider academic development of theory and practice in leadership more generally has generated support for plurality in leadership styles and approaches relevant to context and adaptive to ever-changing circumstances (Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2017; Worrall and Kjaerulf, 2019; Yammarino et al., 2012). Focusing on the need to create networks between people and to create space for people to think creatively and to develop solutions to problems has been shown to be key to effective leadership (Bäcklander, 2019; Doz and Kosonen, 2010; Keister, 2014; Uhl-Bien and Marion, 2009). For policing, this requires a shift beyond models of hierarchy and a ‘them’ and ‘us’ paradigm that is prevalent between paid and volunteer roles in policing, and in many ways between policing and communities more broadly (Glaser and Denhardt, 2010; Knight, 2017; Loader, 2006). Embracing plurality in leadership thinking and development related to the Special Constabulary draws upon wider thinking related to police-community relations, as it both needs and drives policing to engage with a diversity of people and diversity of thinking. Risk-averse thinking in policing maintains a model of public safety that keeps the vast majority of responsibility for public safety in the hands of the paid police officer, despite the growing evidence-base for the successes of co-production (Glaser and Denhardt, 2010).

In conclusion, this paper exposes tension between the traditional strategic paradigm that frames bounded expectations of the role of Special Constables, and the need for reform across the role, practice, identity and integration of volunteer police officers to facilitate their ability to support police service delivery. There is a need, both within individual police forces and at a national level, to give greater consideration to future vision and strategic direction in respect of Special Constabularies. There needs to be a greater openness, vibrancy of debate, engaged at a senior strategic level in policing, about the future of Special Constable roles and contribution.


Declaration of conflicting interests


The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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